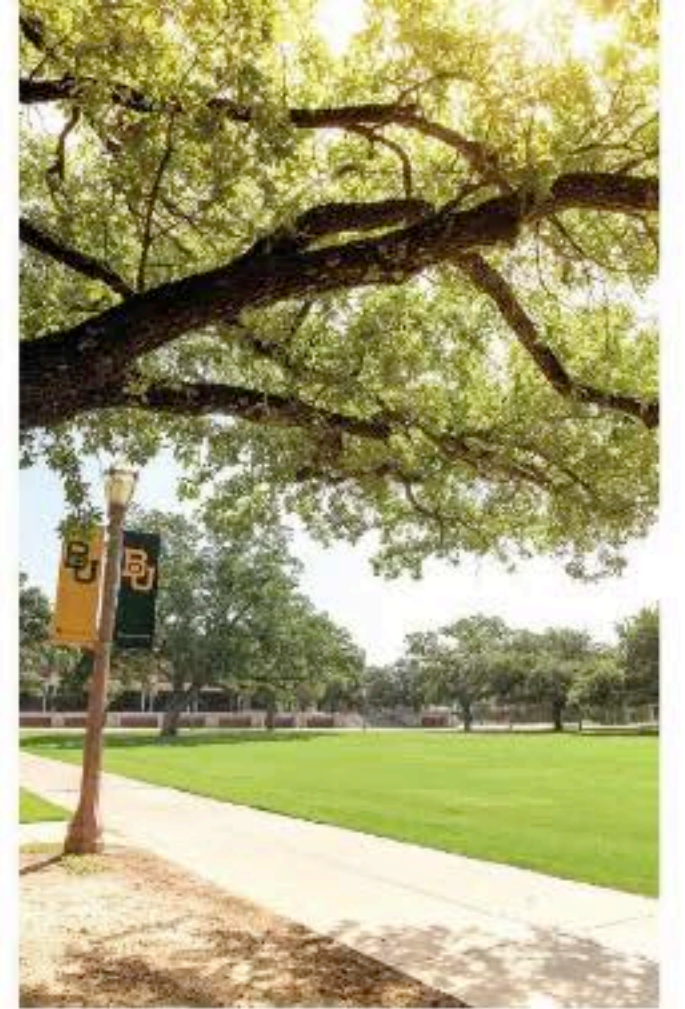




# THE STATE OF THE CLASSROOM

by Gretchen Eichenberg

photos by Cecy Ayala, Photography by Cecy,  
and Amy Trawick, Blackland Photography



**Educators and counselors weigh in on distance learning, mental health and the impact of the pandemic on students and schools alike**

**W**hen COVID-19 brought the traditional school day to a screeching halt last March, educators and their students faced the uncertain path of how to teach and learn — from a distance. Teachers, counselors, administrators and social workers were suddenly separated from the students they were used to guiding, nurturing and even protecting on a daily basis. Their concerns ranged from students getting behind in

course material and missing out on classroom structure to missed meals and the inability to escape an unstable home life for a significant part of the day. While this was heart-wrenching and at times may have seemed impossible to really reach students through a computer screen — many local educators didn't miss a beat. Some found even more purpose and satisfaction in their jobs, stretching themselves beyond

what they thought possible — and found silver linings amid a global pandemic. The *Wacoan* spoke with seven local professionals about the impact on students when school doors are physically closed, how they have embraced new strategies for keeping their kids on a path to success and what their hopes are for the future of education.



# LEADING INTO THE UNKNOWN

**ADRIELLE SELKE**

*Head of School, Eagle Christian Academy*



**WACOAN:** As a principal, what do you see as your most important role in serving students, especially during this very challenging time?

**Selke:** I think it's so very important to create connection. Students need to get back some semblance of normalcy, and the best way to do that is to help them feel like they belong, like they are heard, and

that they have a place in the school community. This connection starts with a school culture that promotes togetherness. It means that as administration and teachers, we value each other and work together as a team. It means teachers find ways to build community in the classroom, whether it is in person or from a distance with online schooling. My role is to help support teachers in that aim, to be present and available for families, and to provide environments where "We are all in this together" is not just a phrase but a practice.

**WACOAN:** How long have you been in education?

**Selke:** I've been in education for 21 years as a classroom teacher, educational interventionist and principal. I've been a principal for four years.

**WACOAN:** How many students do you serve at ECA?

**Selke:** We serve a community of a little under 175 students.

**WACOAN:** As schools went virtual last spring, what were the biggest challenges you faced with your students and their families?

**Selke:** The biggest challenge was pivoting from in-school learning to distance learning. There were many unknowns, but we were more

prepared than we expected due to a recent overhaul in technology. We had recently received grants for computers that were available to any family that needed a device. Our students were already using online tools such as ClassDojo and Google Classroom, and we were able to provide a blended learning of take-home packets and online instruction for our lower grades.

There was definitely a learning curve transitioning from on-campus to online instruction, but with the help of surveys that provided parent feedback, our teachers were able to refine teaching practices to deliver solid education to our students for the rest of the year.

Another challenge that existed throughout the shutdown was communication. We all had to condition ourselves to a new way of learning and a new way of getting our messages across. We leaned on video conferencing technology, email and social media, but we also just picked up the phone. Staying connected any way you can is so important.

**WACOAN:** How did you communicate with students and families, in order to keep a sense of normalcy and community?

**Selke:** We provided weekly newsletters, and teachers regularly communicated with students via Zoom meetings for class sessions. We held town hall meetings to answer questions and update families on the academic plans moving forward and addressed concerns voiced in our surveys.

We continued to hold weekly chapel services via Zoom and even did Friday Pick Me Ups by delivering cookies to our upper school students. At the end of school the lower-school teachers had a parade for the students, and many teachers scheduled times to connect via Zoom outside of academics to allow time for the students to be together.

Teaching our children how to appropriately connect online for class has led to connections outside of class too. Our community is now more connected than ever. We've heard stories of kids playing board games over Zoom or connecting for study sessions this way, and this has continued over the summer with online play dates and FaceTime calls.



*Continue Adrielle's Q&A on page 94*



**DE'JHAN BURNS**  
College and Career Readiness Counselor,  
Harmony School of Innovation

# ADVISING MORE THAN ACADEMICS



**WACOAN:** As a high school counselor, what do you see as your most important role in serving students, especially during this very challenging time?

**Stewart:** It has been most important in my role as a counselor to find flexible ways to correspond with students and listen to their stories, despite our inability to meet in a face-to-face setting. Students are presently being impacted by the pandemic in ways they likely never imagined.

In addition to managing the typical stressors associated with high school, students are also faced with uncertainty regarding their academic futures, in spite of the time they may have invested in thoughtful planning. Each student's

route to achieve his or her goals after high school is different, and each student has been impacted differently during the pandemic. It is imperative that I listen attentively in order to determine how I can best assist students with moving forward and overcoming obstacles as they continue to pursue their goals during these challenging times.

**Burns:** On my door, it says "Counselor," but kids come to us for all the things. Yes, we are guiding them in their academic life, but probably any school counselor will tell you, we have multiple roles. We are like mom and dad No. 2; we are also making sure kids have a lunch and are doing well at home.

A huge part of what I do is the

emotional side. If kids aren't doing well at home or are having a lot of outside issues, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for them to focus in school. As an English teacher, I had my kids journal a lot, and that gave me a huge perspective of what these babies are going through when they are not with me.

While academics and careers are a huge part of what I do, I focus a lot on building relationships with my students. If the relationship is not there, the student is a lot less likely to hear what you are trying to say. I make it a goal to connect with them on a deeper emotional level so that I can really get through to them. When we left school and then didn't come back, that connection was huge.

**WACOAN:** How many students do you serve?

**Stewart:** My primary focus is on college and career readiness at Midway. I coordinate the planning for course offerings, scheduling of classes and advising for approximately 500 juniors and seniors enrolled in the Greater Waco Advanced Manufacturing Academy, Greater Waco Advanced Health Care Academy or in dual credit coursework through McLennan Community College and Texas State Technical College.

**Burns:** I have about 200 students under my wing. Last year, I had 8th, 10th and 12th grades. As counselors, we follow the children through their time with us, so I have the same kids every year. That way, there's consistency and we really get to know the families.

**WACOAN:** How long have you been in this role?

**Stewart:** I have served as a professional school counselor since 2009.

**Burns:** This will be my third year as a counselor, but I've been at Harmony for seven years. I was a high school English teacher before I transitioned into the school counselor role.

**WACOAN:** As schools went virtual last spring, what were the biggest challenges you faced with your students, regarding their academics?

**Stewart:** One of the biggest challenges for students was the sudden transition to online learning after spring break. Some students were learning how to learn at home and at the same time learning how to navigate an online learning platform. There were also technical difficulties for some.

From an academic standpoint, some students found it difficult to engage in the virtual instruction and interaction with the same level of fidelity they contributed during face-to-face instruction and interaction with their peers. As a counselor, I was faced with the task of finding creative ways to assist students through this transition remotely.

**Burns:** The lack of structure was hard on students. A lot of our kids have parents working long hours, for instance, in the medical field. With everybody home, many of them had to help take care of younger siblings while the parent went to work. They were trying to get everyone fed and taken care of and felt like they hardly had time to log in. I advised them to try and build some structure into their day, so they would have a little bit more control.

**EBONY STEWART**  
College and Career Counselor,  
Midway High School



Another big issue is inequity or lack of access. At school, there is plenty of technology for everyone to use. But when we transitioned to online, we were able to give out one computer per family. And we have many families with multiple siblings, all having to share the computer. Another challenge was lack of internet. Some companies were offering free Wi-Fi, but that required the purchase of a \$75 router, which was another issue. You see where those really big gaps are when you implement something like this. And because of these issues, everything just took the students more time. We tried to work with them and accommodate them however we could.

Another problem was food scarcity. About 80-85% of our students are considered economically disadvantaged, which gives them free access to breakfast and lunch. Those first months, we bagged up sandwiches, chicken nuggets, milk, cereal and handed them out to the families. I think that took away a lot of anxiety because they knew their kids would at least have breakfast and lunch.

*Continue  
De'Jhan and Ebony's  
Q&A on page 100*



# SERVING THE MOST VULNERABLE

**SHIRLEY LANGSTON**

*Family Support Specialist, Transformation Waco*

# W

**WACOAN:** Transformation Waco focuses on enhancing student outcomes at five priority schools in Waco Independent School District. As a family support specialist, what do you see as your most important role in serving students, before and now during this very challenging time?

**Langston:** Our main focus is to really connect our schools with our community and to make our schools a comfortable place for our parents to come and communicate. We want to help them with whatever issues they might be having with their child's education or any other underlying circumstances that might be preventing them from taking full advantage of their child's academic success — whether it's paying the rent, getting food or toiletries.

As a family support specialist, we are there to support the student academically but also socially, financially and even mentally. We connect them to the resources in our community that can help them through these challenges.

**WACOAN:** As schools went virtual last spring, what were the biggest challenges faced by your students and their families?

**Langston:** I'm certainly not thankful for this pandemic. A lot of peoples' lives have been hindered and people have lost their lives. But it has exposed a lot of systemic poverty and situations that people were not aware of. And for that, I'm grateful.

I was telling some people in a meeting that we have families

with no toilet paper and hygiene products — but the pandemic didn't cause that. We already had those issues, and we have been providing those items to our families. But, some people have no idea that's the case. Food stamps — or SNAP — doesn't allow them to buy things like soap and laundry detergent; it's just for food. We have a washer and dryer at school where we can wash and dry their uniforms. That's important because how a child presents himself or how he feels about himself determines a lot about what's going to happen in that day.

One of the biggest challenges we faced when everyone had to stay at home was how these kids were going to have access to these things, as well as the breakfast and lunch that they were used to getting at school. We immediately got with Child Nutrition Services and asked what we could do to provide food for these families. We hit the streets, knocking on doors, letting our families know that food was being provided at several locations. We started out with breakfast and lunch, then we added dinner and a weekend packet.

We had a food pantry that came about during this time, and it's housed at First Baptist Church Waco. It's called the Community Food Pantry, and people can make donations. What makes this food pantry different is that volunteers actually deliver to families that have no transportation. So, that is huge, and it's still going on throughout the summer.

Another thing that I think was really exposed is that, though Waco ISD worked really, really hard to get our students into virtual learning, compared to other school districts, we were not there. We just were not there technology-wise. And I think that brought an awareness to our city, to our local government, that Waco ISD was not where Midway or Robinson or La Vega or the other school districts were. They were already doing some virtual learning, but that wasn't happening for our schools. We were scrambling.

Transformation Waco and our zone schools, we worked really hard as family support specialists. We were out there in the community, trying to get technology to students, delivering laptops to homes, setting up hot-spots, showing people how to get discounted Wi-Fi. It was a hard task to get all of these students technology so they could participate in virtual learning. It really showed our city that we've got to do better.

Another thing that was hard — and not to discount our parents — is thinking about a low-income neighborhood with parents who have not finished high school themselves, now trying to take on the role of a teacher. That was a lot of the problem. But we were able to be the liaison, making sure the family had what they needed and there was a line of communication between the students and the teachers.

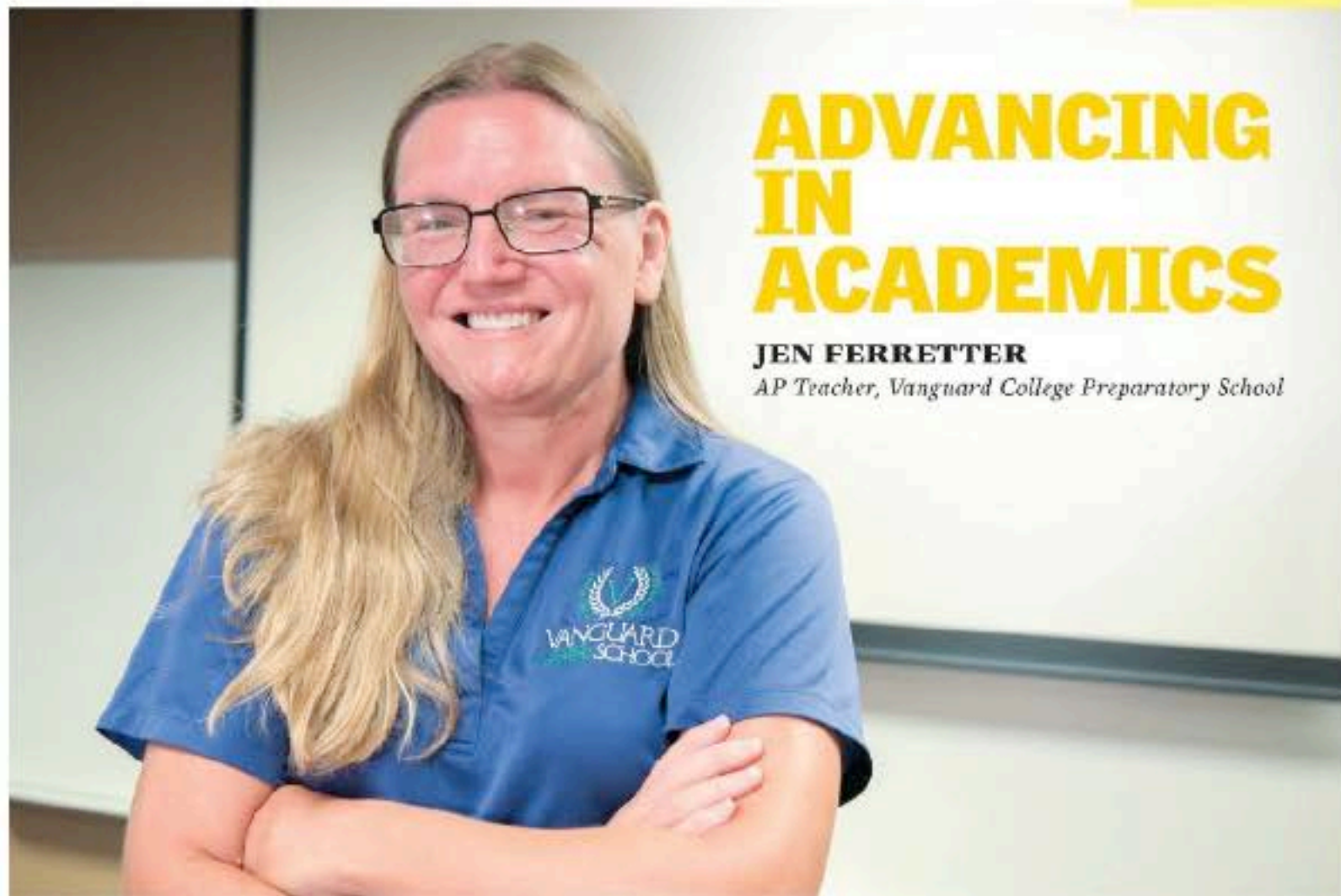


**We have families with no toilet paper and hygiene products — but the pandemic didn't cause that. We already had those issues, and we have been providing those items to our families. But, some people have no idea that's the case."**

*Continue Shirley's Q&A on page 94*







## ADVANCING IN ACADEMICS

**JEN FERRETTTER**

*AP Teacher, Vanguard College Preparatory School*

**WACOAN:** As an AP and advanced level English and history teacher, what do you see as your most important role in serving students, before and now during this very challenging time?

**Ferretter:** Because Vanguard is a college preparatory school, my primary goal is always to make sure that my students are college ready. I very much want to make sure that they are able to not just get by in college but really excel.

No matter what students go on to study, they will never be poorly served by knowing how to write well. Good writers go far. And I think that it is crucial that students learn to be critical thinkers. Not everything that one reads is true.

Last but not least, I want to make sure that we graduate kind students, young adults who will help improve this world.

**WACOAN:** What upper level courses do you teach? And how many students do you teach at Vanguard?

**Ferretter:** I have been teaching AP art history, AP English literature, AP English language and AP European history at Vanguard. I am really blessed; I usually only have between 10 and 15 students in each section of a class, sometimes fewer.

I have been teaching for 23 years, 13 at Vanguard.

**WACOAN:** As schools went virtual last spring, what were the biggest challenges you faced, being able to continue instruction at the highest standard?

**Ferretter:** It was just really difficult not seeing the kids every day. I speak for all Vanguard teachers and probably all teachers. We love our students, and we missed them terribly.

Timing was another tough challenge. All of my in-person lessons were planned to fill 50 minutes, five days a week. But when we went virtual, we had to send our students a week's work at a time because we had one longer Zoom class weekly. In other words, I had to set about five or six hours of work per class.

It is very different teaching weekly as opposed to daily; I felt a little like my husband, [Dr. Luke Ferretter], a Baylor English professor. Interestingly, one of my colleagues rightly pointed out that this — weekly classes and independent student work in between — was as college prep as you could get. With regards to independent pacing, our virtual students were like college students.

*Continue Jen's Q&A on page 96*

## TEACHING THE TEACHERS

**TERRILL F. SAXON, PH.D.**

*Professor of Educational Psychology  
and Associate Dean of Graduate Studies,  
Baylor University*

**WACOAN:** As a school of education, what do you see as Baylor professors' most important role in serving students and preparing them to become teachers, both before and now during this very challenging time?

**Saxon:** The most important role of the school of education's professors who teach pre-service teachers is to properly equip them with the tools they will need to be highly effective with their future students. This role has not changed with the pandemic, but the tools may have. For example, there has been growing pressure to keep up with technology and how to best use it in the classroom. This pressure has increased exponentially since online learning is most likely here to stay in some way.

**WACOAN:** How many students are currently enrolled in the Baylor School of Education?

**Saxon:** There are around 380 undergrad students in our school.

**WACOAN:** And how long have you been teaching?

**Saxon:** I have been teaching for 25 years.

**WACOAN:** As the schools went virtual last spring, what were the biggest challenges you and other professors faced, being able to continue instruction at the highest standards?

**Saxon:** Most of the courses in our undergraduate teacher education program have a field-based component, meaning that some of the course occurs within a public school classroom. Many of our graduate courses have a field-based portion as well. These experiences occur in schools, clinics and other agencies. The biggest challenge with schools shutting down was finding a way for our students to not only complete their coursework but also for our seniors (teacher interns) to meet the Texas Education Agency's minimum required number of supervised student-teaching clock-hours and days in public schools. Under Governor Abbott's emergency declaration, TEA was able to issue waivers for educator preparation programs across the state for these requirements, and this allowed our students to move on in the certification process.

A challenge for all higher education institutions, as well as public and private schools, was quickly moving from face-to-face instruction to a web-based mode such as livestream, distance or remote learning, synchronous or asynchronous. Institutions, faculty and students at all levels had to quickly adapt to technology-based learning. While Baylor is well-positioned and equipped with this technology, college students are on the spectrum with their own computers, devices, internet speed and bandwidth, and this could limit their ability to learn through internet-based methods.

*Continue  
Terrill's  
Q&A on  
page 104*



# NAVIGATING THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT

**KATHLEEN GEIGER, M.ED., LPC**

*Psychotherapist*

**WACOAN:** Describe what you see as the most significant impact, mentally and emotionally, of young children, older kids and even college students not being able to attend school during this time.

**Geiger:** The first few weeks of the shutdown seemed to offer families a chance to pause. I consistently heard clients say they secretly enjoyed having the time away — away from constant after-school commitments and nonstop homework, rushed schedules and lack of downtime. However, after about four weeks, children and parents began to settle into a longer-term 'normal.'

Parents were reporting their young children were having difficulty following a schedule, they were more clingy, and sibling

conflict was happening more than before. Parents reported having difficulty getting their children on a routine and found it difficult to get their children engaged in consistent online school learning.

After the novelty wore off, parents reported middle school children as lacking energy, moodier and defensive about parents' insistence on making the home a mini-classroom. Children were insisting on more online time, just not in-school online time. Parents reported being confused about how much to intervene and much to allow their child to self-pace.

Although parents didn't need to instruct, per se, their teenagers, they did struggle with how to keep their kids engaged in finishing lectures and homework. Without the classroom community, learning

was not as fun. They reported their teenagers as restless, lonely and hungry for peer interaction. Parents were finding their children more anxious, and as the pandemic continued, anger and apathy became more apparent. To be sure, the longer schools stay closed the less motivated everyone was to continue the in-school pace.

Children with special needs, such as autism, emotional difficulties and learning disabilities, suffered the greatest. The needed services for these children are built in to the daily [school] schedule, and I cannot overstate the vulnerability these children experience when they are unable to continue getting the services they need.

Perhaps the hardest reality is that many children had nowhere to go. Those parents who could work, did.





**P**arents were cautioned to social distance with the elderly, including those of their own families. This left a gap in the family child care system. Parents felt fewer and fewer options, and many children spent much more time alone than was healthy. Without supervision, these children were vulnerable to dangers. Many times nutritional needs went unmet due to lack of resources and meal preparation. Families experiencing joblessness and illness were stressed to the brink. The reports on the increase of child abuse are just now coming to light.

**WACOAN:** What kinds of lasting effects can this have on kids?

**Geiger:** Humans are hard-wired for connection. Neuroscience has proven that our nervous systems want us to connect with other human beings. The distress of social isolation is biologically identical to the distress of physical pain. When we are in a state of isolation, our bodies respond as though we are in danger.

People, especially children, need other people in order to calm and regulate themselves. When we are regulated, we are able to think clearly, make decisions, solve

problems and manage emotional upsets in a healthy way. Without others, clear thinking and healthy emotional development is not possible. Connection is necessary in order to manage our internal stress.

**WACOAN:** In general, how do you weigh the severity of these effects compared to the physical risks of going back to school this fall, while numbers are still high?

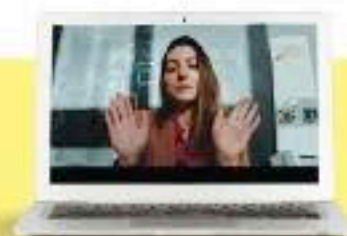
**Geiger:** While I have no expertise in public health, policy or epidemiology, I look to professional organizations, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control for guidance. The AAP strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school. The importance of in-person learning is well documented, and there is already evidence of the negative impacts on children because of school closures in the spring of 2020.

**WACOAN:** Children in unstable or at-risk households can face particular challenges, simply due to the absence of parental support or getting basic needs met — things

that are often provided at school. How big a concern is this for you?

**Geiger:** Schools provide a foundation of normalcy and stability for children and adolescents. Schools provide structure by providing a place to engage the thinking and learning brain. Schools provide children with social and emotional connection to both adults as well as other children. Predictable services such as reliable nutrition, attachment and direction and medical assistance help keep children healthy. Exercise, play and creativity are all necessary for the development of healthy children. Schools have long been a safe haven for children, especially those with special needs, who may be unable to access consistent needed services elsewhere. Children need a great deal of attention in order for healthy brain development. The negative consequences of the pandemic will affect children the most in the long term.

Continue Kathleen's Q&A on [page 98](#)



For the most current information about each school's response to COVID-19, visit the websites below:

Acton Academy Waco: [actonwaco.org](http://actonwaco.org)

Axtell ISD: [axtellisd.net](http://axtellisd.net)

Bishop Louis Reicher: [bishopreicher.com](http://bishopreicher.com)

Bosqueville ISD: [bosquevilleisd.org](http://bosquevilleisd.org)

Bruceville-Eddy ISD: [beisd.net](http://beisd.net)

China Spring ISD: [chinaspringisd.net](http://chinaspringisd.net)

Connally ISD: [connally.org](http://connally.org)

Crawford ISD: [crawford-isd.net](http://crawford-isd.net)

Eagle Christian Academy: [ecawaco.com](http://ecawaco.com)

EOAC Waco Charter School: [eoacwaco.org](http://eoacwaco.org)

Harmony School of Innovation: [hswaco.org](http://hswaco.org)

Harmony Science Academy: [hsawaco.harmonyschool.org](http://hsawaco.harmonyschool.org)

La Vega ISD: [lavegaisd.org](http://lavegaisd.org)

Live Oak Classical School: [liveoakclassical.com](http://liveoakclassical.com)

Lorena ISD: [lorenaisd.net](http://lorenaisd.net)

Mart ISD: [martisd.org](http://martisd.org)

McGregor ISD: [mcgregor-isd.org](http://mcgregor-isd.org)

Midway ISD: [midwayisd.org](http://midwayisd.org)

Moody ISD: [moodyisd.org](http://moodyisd.org)

Parkview Christian Academy: [parkviewwaco.com](http://parkviewwaco.com)

Rapaport Academy: [rapaportacademy.org](http://rapaportacademy.org)

Riesel ISD: [rieselisd.org](http://rieselisd.org)

Robinson ISD: [risdweb.org](http://risdweb.org)

St. Paul's Episcopal School: [spewaco.org](http://spewaco.org)

Valor Preparatory Academy: [valorprep.com](http://valorprep.com)

Vanguard College Preparatory School: [vanguard.org](http://vanguard.org)

Waco ISD: [wacoisd.org](http://wacoisd.org)

Waco Montessori School: [wacomontessorischool.org](http://wacomontessorischool.org)

West ISD: [westisd.net](http://westisd.net)

Woodway Christian School: [woodwaychristianschool.org](http://woodwaychristianschool.org)

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